



News Release

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South Carolina student support “Summer of Service”

Volunteers of today learn skills while helping heroes of yesterday

by Bob Hall, Wm. Jennings Bryan Dorn public affairs specialist

COLUMBIA, S.C. – Almost since the time Europeans stepped foot in the New World, the United States has relied on people “stepping up to the plate” and volunteering. In early colonial days, people worked together in order to survive the harsh living; they formed support groups to help each other plant crops, build houses and fight disease.

Some 200 years later, Benjamin Franklin is credited with putting together the first volunteer firehouse in 1736; an idea that has become the country’s norm, as nearly 70 percent of all firefighters today are volunteers, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

Today, the Veterans Administration benefits greatly from an outstanding volunteer program it has in place, and to highlight the importance of volunteerism the VA is renewing its commitment to America’s Veterans by kicking off a “[Summer of Service](#)” campaign.

The leadership of the [William Jennings Bryan Dorn Veterans Affairs Medical Center](#) sees the value in volunteerism and appreciates all those who give some of their valuable time for service to America’s Veterans.

“Our volunteer force here is the heart and soul of many of the services offered free to the Veterans who grace these halls with their presence,” says Dorn VAMC Director Timothy McMurry. “They have a huge impact daily on the success for this facility.”

Tammy Finney, the chief of Dorn VAMC’s Voluntary Service, agrees, but she adds, “It’s a pleasure to work daily with such selflessly, dedicated, patriotic and committed men and women.”

But it’s not just adults who volunteer.

Visit us at our public website (www.columbiasc.va.gov/) and on Facebook (www.facebook.com/VAColumbiaSC).

Recently, nearly 50 teenagers from the local area, ranging in age from 13 to 17, became Dorn VAMC's latest group of volunteers. Their "Summer of Service" will last about two months as part of the facility's Summer Student Program.

The student volunteers are assigned to areas of interest for their future careers and Dorn employee mentors are available to support the student's future endeavors through writing letters of reference.

"Many young people have come through this program over the years," Finney said. "We hope it positively impacts their lives with gained knowledge, experience, and their ability to obtain scholarships."

One of the young people is Mickayla McIntyre, a 15-year-old, who spent her last two summers volunteering in Dorn VAMC's physical therapy department.

McIntyre says she was highly interested in the area of rehabilitation; which blends well with her future goals. Her number one future career interest right now is to become an athletic trainer for a sports team. Through a volunteer position like the one she's doing in physical therapy, she has been afforded the opportunity to gain some valuable experience and acquire knowledge toward her future goals.

In her first year at Dorn VAMC, McIntyre said worked in the office area at physical therapy and assisted where she was needed and absorbed all the knowledge she could. During her second year, she was asked if she wanted to help with assisting inpatient and outpatient Veterans and she jumped at the chance. Now, in her third year she has stepped up to help in a number of other ways.

"After that first year, I wanted to come back (to physical therapy)," McIntyre said. "I really like it there."

"This year I have had the opportunity to help Veterans regain their balance after leg surgeries, help both in and outpatients with their mobility too, and train them on how to use wheelchairs; both manual and battery-operated," she said.

Additionally, she's helped with a process called dry-needling (acupuncture); a general term for a therapeutic treatment procedure that involves multiple advances of a filament needle into the muscle in the area of the body which produces pain and typically contains a trigger point. She also has learned to give deep tissue massages, work on trigger points, and she cleans and assembles equipment like wheelchairs and rollators (the rolling walkers).

“I like to see the smiles on their faces,” McIntyre says of the Veterans she helps. “They see a young person like me caring and spending their time here at the VA instead of somewhere else, and that makes me feel good.”

She’s truly thankful Dorn VAMC offers a program like the Student Summer Program. She says, “...it gives me an opportunity to interact with people of all ages and learn more about the medical field.”

Recently, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald said, “There is no mission more noble than serving Veterans and their families. State by state, community by community, person by person, there are a number of ways we can all come together to serve Veterans.”

And according to Diane Riley, the mother of 13-year-old Nathaniel Riley, Nathaniel loves what he does here as a student summer volunteer and he takes his job seriously.

“Initially, he was only planning on volunteering here three days a week,” Riley’s mother said. “But he enjoys what he does so much that he wants to come here every day.”

Riley is an 8th grader at Hopkins Middle School in Columbia and this is his first year volunteering at Dorn VAMC. He is currently volunteering in the Audiology/Speech Pathology clinic here. He said he is learning all he can about hearing aids and other devices that assist Veterans in hearing better.

He says the work he does here makes him feel good and is a great starting point for his future career goals. Though, at this point, he is still undecided what those career goals are exactly.

“I’m only 13 years old now,” he says. “But I know I like what I am doing here right now.” However, he admits he has several interests as well. His mother says he likes reading, writing and acting as well. “I want to entertain and help others at the same time,” he adds.

“Once I get into high school, I will truly find out which way I’m going,” he says. “In the meantime, I like doing this and it might be something I want to do later in life.”

Riley says he knows it’s hard for someone his age to acquire skills like this at such an early age, so he is grateful for the experiences and skills he is learning here on a daily basis.

One of the things Riley said he’s learned so far is that not all hearing aids are alike.

“Some of these hearing aids are way into the future,” he adds. “They have Bluetooth and some even have Wi-Fi built into them. These are way cool.”

But it's not just learning about the technology used to aid the Veterans that Riley likes about his time here. Riley also loves how his supervisor and others in the department treat him as if he is a fellow co-worker or intern.

"I'm paid with gratitude, kindness and motivation," he says. "Everyone here treats me so nice – like a new employee. It makes me think if I should work here at Dorn in the future."

Pamela McCurry, Riley's supervisor, says she's been impressed with Riley's work and thankful for all he's done in the short time he's been here.

"We needed this help in a great way," McCurry said. "We had a table almost ceiling high with hearing aids that needed processing. We appreciate how fast he learned what had to be done and has gotten us back on track within a week or two, we truly appreciate him."

Success stories like McIntyre and Riley are only two drops in a sea of possibilities. The Student Summer Volunteer program has had many successes. In fact, some former graduates of the program are now college students and graduates in medicine, physical therapy and social work, just to name a few.

Last year, 62 students logged more than 6,800 hours at Dorn VA and the Greenville Community-Base Outpatient Clinic.

Each individual has his or her own reason for volunteering, whether it's for future life skills, to be a part of the community, to help the less fortunate, or, as in the case here, simply wanting to give back to others who have given so much. Whatever the reason, volunteers are a valued today as they were hundreds of years ago.

Winston Churchill was noted with saying, "We make a living by what we do, but we make a life by what we give."

To find out more information about volunteering, visit the VA Voluntary Service site at www.volunteer.va.gov.



Nathaniel Riley, a student volunteer at Dorn VAMC, inspects hearing aids packages to ensure all the items the Veteran needs are present. Riley is one of nearly 50 youth volunteers participating the facility's Summer Student Volunteer Program this year. (Dorn VA photo/released)